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SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN/COUNTERNARCOTICS: UNODC LOWERING
EXPECTATIONS FOR 2009 OPIUM REPORT

REF: A. A) KABUL 179
[B. B\) KABUL 280](#)
[C. C\) KABUL 1745](#)

Classified By: AMBASSADOR E. ANTHONY WAYNE FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Jean-Luc Lemahieu, the UNODC's Country Representative in Kabul, predicts that the UNODC's annual opium survey will show 10-15 percent decrease in poppy cultivation in 2009. While a significant drop, this is less dramatic than the 19 percent reduction reported in 2008, and raises concerns that the gains of the last two years may not be sustainable. Earlier predictions of 4-5 additional provinces becoming poppy-free in 2009 are not likely to be realized; according to Lemahieu, the Afghans will be "lucky" to maintain all 18 currently poppy-free provinces. More aggressive Governor-Led Eradication (GLE), and more effective use of the Poppy Eradication Force (PEF), could have helped make more provinces poppy-free, and eradication should remain one of the pillars in a comprehensive counternarcotics strategy to discourage back-sliding. Unfortunately, the recent release of 5 convicted narco-traffickers by Karzai calls into serious question the Afghan government's commitment to counternarcotics and anti-corruption goals; Lemahieu speculated that a Karzai victory in the August

elections would not improve the situation. END SUMMARY.

FEWER POPPY-FREE PROVINCES; SLOWER DECLINE IN CULTIVATION:

12. (C) According to UNODC Afghan Country Representative Jean-Luc Lemahieu, UNODC currently projects that the decline in Afghan poppy cultivation will be less in 2009 than in 2008, and that the number of poppy free provinces may not increase from 18, contrary to previous expectations. In a July 10 meeting with NAS Director, Lemahieu said that the January, 2009 Opium Rapid Assessment Survey's (ORAS) prediction that up to 4 additional provinces might become poppy free in 2009 (Refs A and B) would likely turn out to be overly optimistic; in fact, the Afghan government would be "lucky" not to see some formerly poppy-free provinces return to poppy-growing status. Nangarhar, for example, would probably not be listed as poppy-free in the upcoming UNODC Opium Survey despite being poppy-free in 2008. Herat and Badakhshan -- which were not considered poppy-free in 2008, but were widely expected to be so in 2009 -- also now appeared to have harvested a significant amount of poppy.

13. (C) In terms of overall poppy cultivation, Lemahieu predicted that the 2009 UNODC Opium Survey would likely report a decrease of 10-15 percent. While this would be a significant drop, it would not be as impressive as the 19 percent reduction reported in 2008. Lemahieu suggested that this could indicate that the "market adjustment" that was one of the main factors in the 2008 reduction was "leveling off." Relatively low prices of opium compared to wheat (in some places a 2:1 ration) continued in 2008-2009 to make wheat an attractive alternative to opium, but Lemahieu worried that this would not be sustainable over the long run.

14. (C) Lemahieu cautioned that the UNODC was still in the early stages of preparing its assessment: "only 10 percent of the vote has been counted." He also acknowledged that he was deliberately presenting a "more pessimistic" view now, partly because earlier expectations for dramatic progress had been so high. For example, the Afghan government should not have publicly declared Herat "poppy-free" before UNODC had had a chance to complete its survey; now the Afghans are likely to be embarrassed even if the report indicates only a few hundred hectares of opium cultivation in Herat.

15. (C) NAS Director noted that a 15 percent reduction was still a positive development, and said he hoped the UNODC report would reflect that. Similarly, while it would be unfortunate if Nangarhar was no longer considered poppy-free in 2009, there was a huge difference between a "few hundred" hectares of cultivation and the 18,000 hectares of poppy cultivated in Nangarhar in 2007. Lemahieu agreed, but reiterated that sustaining the positive results of the past two years would be difficult if momentum appears to be slowing. He anticipated that an increase in opium prices, combined with a continuing lack of stable markets for alternative crops, could lead many farmers to shift back to large-scale poppy cultivation. The growing perception that there will be no more eradication, he added, could also

contribute to this shift if farmers believe they can grow poppy without risk.

DISAPPOINTING ERADICATION EFFORTS:

16. (C) NAS Director stressed that the U.S. was not reducing its commitment to Afghan counternarcotics efforts. While resources would be shifted away from eradication and into interdiction and agricultural development, we would continue to support limited, targeted eradication as one pillar in the comprehensive Afghan strategy. Lemahieu welcomed the message, but reiterated that the perception among many Afghans -- and members of the international community -- was that there would be no more eradication in Afghanistan. The Afghan counternarcotics strategy was like an orchestra; you

could ask different sections to play louder or more softly, but you should never completely eliminate an instrument. Both sticks and carrots were necessary parts of the strategy, he concluded.

17. (C) In response to a question from NAS Director, Lemahieu said he was disappointed by the lackluster government-led eradication efforts around the country this year. As many as 7 provinces, he said, could have become poppy free with more forceful governor-led action. He also speculated that if the Poppy Eradication Force (PEF) had been deployed as an expeditionary force to these provinces, instead of concentrating on Helmand, many of these provinces could have become poppy-free. NAS Director reminded Lemahieu that there had been a strategic decision to concentrate PEF efforts in Helmand in order to support Governor Mangal's "food zone" concept. The PEF was also not currently configured to undertake multiple eradication efforts in several provinces simultaneously. Lemahieu said he understood the strategy and the limitations on the PEF, but reiterated that eradicating "1,700 hectares in 7 provinces" would have given Afghanistan 25 poppy-free provinces this year; instead, the PEF had eradicated "3,000 hectares in 1 province (Helmand)" with minimal impact on the rest of the country and only a modest increase in the overall number of hectares eradicated.

LACK OF POLITICAL WILL STILL BIGGEST PROBLEM:

18. (C) Finally, Lemahieu complained that the April release of 5 convicted drug traffickers by President Karzai (Ref C) sent a very negative message regarding the central government's commitment to counternarcotics. The fact that the international community was not consulted or even informed about the releases until a press conference in July, he added, showed clear disdain for those contributing millions of dollars to help the Afghans build the capacity to arrest, try, and convict narco-traffickers. He speculated that the central government's tolerance of drug trafficking and corruption at multiple levels was not likely to decrease following a Karzai win in the upcoming elections, and that this fact could also contribute to an upsurge in poppy cultivation in coming years. NAS Director agreed that combating corruption at all levels was a necessary component of any effective counternarcotics strategy, especially as the U.S. and others increased support for interdiction operations.

COMMENT:

19. (C) The UNODC's annual report on opium cultivation (the Opium Survey) probably will not be released formally until late August or early September (after the Afghan elections,) but its basic outline is usually known well before then. If Lemahieu's predictions are accurate, the report -- while still showing a significant decline in cultivation -- could be seen as a disappointment given earlier, overly optimistic, Afghan estimates. Moving forward, it will be important to focus international efforts on sustaining the progress made over the last two years, including through public information and increasing access to alternative markets, while strengthening the Afghan political will to combat narco-trafficking and corruption directly.

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